

S-E-C-R-E-T

CIA/BI GB 66-16  
December 1965

COMMUNIST CHINA

C. Topography and Climate

Communist China, slightly larger than the United States, is a country of great topographic and climatic diversity. It is characterized by virtually uninhabited gravel and sand deserts in the northwest, forested low mountains in the northeast, densely populated plains and river basins in the east, jungle-covered gorges and mountains in the south, and barren plateaus and high, rugged mountain ranges in the western interior. The climate ranges from polar in some of the high mountain and plateau regions to tropical in the south.

The main centers of agriculture and industry are isolated from one another by areas of mountainous terrain or by major rivers, most of which flow from west to east. These features have hindered development of the internal transportation networks and intensified the problems of developing political cohesion in this large country. The population, mainly agricultural, is concentrated on the plains in the east near the coast and along navigable rivers, where most of the arable land lies.

In the northeast, the gently undulating surface of the Manchurian Plain is interrupted only by low hills that form a divide between the northeastward-flowing Sungari River and the southward-flowing Liao. Except along the Gulf of Liaotung in the south, the plain is bordered by partly forested mountains, which are the chief source of minerals for the industrial cities along the eastern edge of the plain. Winters in the northeast are long, dry, and bitterly cold, and summers are short, hot, and moderately wet.

The great plain of North China, a vast flat bed of alluvial deposits of the Yellow River, forms a broad arc between Peiping and Nanking. The plain is the heart of the wheat and dry grain region of China and is intensively cultivated. Diked streams and drainage canals cross its surface, and large salt evaporators flank the coast in many places. Although the Yellow River -- often referred to as "China's Sorrow" because of its destructive floods in the past -- has been brought under some measure of control, the plain is still harassed by summer floodwaters from other rivers that flow across its surface. West of the plain is an extensive, treeless, and deeply eroded terraced plateau of very thick loess deposits which for centuries have blown in from the deserts of interior China and which now cover most of the hills and lower slopes of mountains in the area. North China has cold dry winters with strong northwest winds, usually dusty, and hot moderately wet summers.

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South of the plain is the densely populated Yangtze Basin, where discontinuous fertile and intensively cultivated alluvial plains stretch along the lower course of the Yangtze River and its main tributaries. Upstream along the river and separated from the lower Yangtze Basin by a small chain of mountains is the Szechwan Basin, a mountain-rimmed depression of intensively cultivated plains and low hills. The Yangtze is the main artery of the largest and most widely used inland waterway system of China. It links the delta region around Shanghai, the most important industrial city in the country, with other major industrial cities along its banks in the interior -- Nanking, Wu-han, and Chungking. The agricultural landscape of flooded terraced ricefields, diked canals, fishponds, and bamboo groves of the Yangtze Basin is typical of all South China. The climate of the Yangtze Basin is transitional between the dry continental north and the wetter, milder south. The lower basin is subject to occasional serious flooding after periods of unusually heavy rainfall.

The mountains of South China are interspersed with intensively cultivated flat plains. The largest and most densely populated plains are along the coast. The largest one centers on Canton. Winters are mild and summers are oppressively hot with heavy rainfall, some of it from seasonal typhoons. In the southwest, the higher elevations of the Yunnan - Kweichow Plateau have a more temperate climate, with cooler winters and less oppressive summers.

West China, including Sinkiang and the Tsinghai - Tibet Plateau, is a sparsely populated region characterized by a large, high, arid plateau and deserts that in many places are rimmed by mountains. The climate is very dry, with an annual rainfall of less than 10 inches and a light snow cover. Diurnal and seasonal temperature ranges are great, and exceedingly strong winds are common.

Recommended general reference maps:

1. Mainland China - Terrain and Transportation; 1:10,000,000; single sheet, approximately 18x21 inches; CIA 36500.
2. World 1:5,000,000; Sheets 7 and 8; each sheet approximately 35x44 inches; AMS Series 1106.
3. China; 1:4,500,000; single sheet, approximately 40x48 inches; CIA 28924.

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Recommended Geographic Intelligence Memoranda pertaining to China:

1. GM 59-3, The China-India Border Dispute,  
November 1959
2. GM 62-9, The Disputed Frontiers of Kashmir,  
November 1962
3. GM 62-10, The Sino-Indian Border Dispute in the  
North East Frontier Agency, November 1962
4. GM 64-1, China's Border With the USSR: Sinkiang,  
March 1964
5. GM 65-3, China's Border With the USSR: Manchuria,  
May 1965

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GEOGRAPHIC RESEARCH ACTIVITY NOTICE	
TO:	CHIEF, <del>GEOGRAPHIC RESEARCH, OBI</del> DIRECTOR OF OBI
THROUGH:	CHIEF, GEOGRAPHY DIVISION, <del>OBI</del> OBI
FROM:	CHIEF, <del>Far East/Pacific Branch</del>
SUBJECT:	GEOGRAPHIC RESEARCH ACTIVITY NOTICE
1. SUBJECT	
OCI Handbook: Communist China	
2. PROBLEM	
The 27 January 1958 version of the OCI Handbook on Communist China is being revised. Geography Division has been asked to review the material included in Section VI, General Data, especially part C., Climate and Topography, and make the appropriate revisions.	
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3. NAME OF REQUESTER	4. NAME OF D/GG ANALYST
5. COORDINATES	
None	
6. DUE DATE	7. PROJECT NUMBER
8. REMARKS:	
None	

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